



National
Institute of
Circus Arts



aspect
Autism Spectrum Australia

Circus Glossary

NICA

A Visual Story



Learn more about the language of circus.

Circus has lots of terminology and unique language related to specific apparatus, skills, and movements.

This glossary will provide information and sample images of circus skills.

This is not an exhaustive list of all circus skills, but an illustration of ones you are likely to see during classes and performances.



Ground Acts

Acrobatics

Acrobatics uses strength, balance, trust, and coordination to create dynamic movement between multiple performers. Performers may lift one another, balancing on each other, being thrown or caught through the air, and performing feats that require precise teamwork and timing. In circus, acrobatics may include:

- **Two-highs** – two people balancing one on top of the other.
- **Three-highs** – three performers stacked vertically in a human tower.
- **Banquine** – people use their hands and bodies to launch another acrobat into the air.
- **Tosses** – dynamic throws and catches that showcase power, trust, and precision.
- **Hand-to-hand** – one person balancing on the hands of another while performing poses, balances, or movements.
- **Tumbling** – rolls, cartwheels, handsprings, and somersaults.



Ground Acts

Handstand Canes

An artist performs hand balances on two small handgrips mounted on poles (known as canes). The canes raise the performer above the ground, allowing for greater range of movement and creating striking visual lines. In circus, people may:

- Balance upside down on their hands for extended periods.
- Shift their weight from one arm to the other.
- Move through controlled poses and shapes.
- Perform presses, turns, and one-arm handstands.
- Combine extraordinary strength, flexibility, balance, and precision.



Ground Acts

Chair Stack

A balancing discipline in which performers build towers from specially reinforced chairs and then climb to the top to perform handstands, balances, and other skills. As the tower grows taller, the challenge increases. In circus, chair stack involves:

- Stacking chairs several metres high to create a freestanding tower.
- Climbing and balance at the very top of the structure.
- Performing handstands, one-arm balances, or flexibility poses.
- Carefully transitioning between positions while maintaining balance.
- Combining elements of hand balancing, acrobatics, and artistic presentation.



Photo by Asrinasmara Sastradipradja

Ground Acts

Contortion

Contortion showcases exceptional flexibility, strength, and body control. Artists have an extraordinary range of movement that allows them to bend, twist, and shape their bodies in ways that may seem impossible. In circus, people may:

- Create intricate and sculptural body shapes.
- Bend backwards into deep backbends and chest stands.
- Fold their bodies into compact positions.
- Balance on their hands while performing flexibility skills.
- Combine movement, dance, and artistry with displays of flexibility.
- Perform solo or in combination with props such as handstand canes, chairs, or aerial apparatus.



Ground Acts

Handstands and Hand Balancing

A discipline that combines strength, balance, precision, and body control. While many people are familiar with a basic handstand, circus artists spend years developing the ability to balance upside down while performing increasingly complex movements and transitions. In circus, people may:

- Hold handstands on the floor, blocks, canes, chairs, or elevated platforms.
- Shift their weight onto a single arm in a one-arm handstand.
- Move through a series of controlled balances and shapes.
- Press smoothly into a handstand from the ground without jumping.
- Combine hand balancing with flexibility, contortion, or dance-inspired movement.
- Perform skills at height on apparatus such as chair stacks.



Ground Acts

Hula Hoops

An act that combines object manipulation, coordination, rhythm, and movement. Using one or multiple hoops, performers create patterns and sequences by spinning, rolling, tossing, and manipulating the hoops around their body. In circus, people may:

- Spin hoops around their waist, arms, legs, neck, or multiple body parts at the same time.
- Manipulate several hoops simultaneously in complex patterns.
- Toss and catch hoops with precision and timing.
- Roll hoops across the body or stage and incorporate them into choreography.
- Combine dance, acrobatics, flexibility, or balancing skills with hoop manipulation.
- Create visual illusions through speed, coordination, and continuous movement.



Ground Acts

Juggling

Involves the skilled manipulation of one or more objects through throwing, catching, spinning, balancing, or coordinated movement. Contemporary juggling encompasses a wide range of techniques, props, and artistic styles. In circus, people may:

- Toss and catch balls, clubs, rings, hats, or other objects in complex patterns.
- Manipulate objects through spins, rolls, balances, and body movements.
- Juggle increasing numbers of objects, requiring exceptional coordination and concentration.
- Combine juggling with dance, comedy, acrobatics, or theatrical storytelling.
- Create intricate sequences where objects appear to move effortlessly through space.
- Perform highly technical tricks involving timing, precision, and dexterity.



Photo by Daniel Rabin

Ground Acts

Roue Cyr (Cyr Wheel)

A large metal ring that is approximately the height of the performer. The artist stands inside the wheel and uses their body weight, momentum, and balance to spin, roll, and glide across the stage. In circus, people may:

- Rotate inside the wheel as it spins in circles and figure-eight patterns.
- Perform balances and poses while moving through space.
- Hang, lean, and suspend themselves from different points within the wheel.
- Build speed for dynamic spins and sweeping movements.
- Create the illusion of effortlessly floating, orbiting, or dancing with the apparatus.
- Combine acrobatic skills, dance, and theatrical expression with the movement of the wheel.

FUN FACT:

- Roue cyr is one of the newest circus acts, invented in just 1996!



Photo by Cameron Grant

Aerial Acts

Chinese Pole

Performed on a vertical pole, usually several metres high, that is secured to the floor and ceiling. Artists use strength, agility, and coordination to climb, slide, balance, and perform dynamic acrobatic movements on and around the pole. In circus, people may:

- Climb rapidly to great heights.
- Hold their body horizontally or upside down while gripping the pole.
- Execute powerful drops and controlled slides.
- Swing around the pole using momentum and strength.
- Jump, flip, and perform acrobatic transitions between positions.
- Work solo or with partners to create dynamic aerial sequences.



Aerial Acts

Dance Trapeze

An aerial discipline performed on a trapeze suspended from a single point, allowing the apparatus to swing, spin, and move freely through the air. Dance trapeze combines aerial technique with fluid, expressive movement inspired by dance. In circus, people may:

- Swing and spin high above the stage.
- Balance, hang, and move around the trapeze bar and ropes.
- Transition smoothly between poses, balances, and dynamic sequences.
- Use momentum to create sweeping circular movements through the air.
- Combine strength, flexibility, and artistry with choreographed performance.



Photo by Cameron Grant

Aerial Acts

Flying Silks

An aerial discipline performed on two long lengths of fabric suspended from above. Artists climb, wrap, suspend, and spin through the air using the fabric, combining strength, flexibility, grace, and dynamic aerial technique. In circus, people may:

- Climb high into the air using only the fabric.
- Wrap the silks around their body to create intricate shapes and positions.
- Hang upside down, balance in suspended poses, and perform strength-based skills.
- Execute dramatic drops, where fabric wraps safely slow and control the descent.
- Spin, twist, and flow through the air in choreographed sequences.



Aerial Acts

Lyra, Aerial Hoop, or A-Ring

An aerial circus discipline performed on a suspended steel ring. Artists use the hoop as a moving platform to perform balances, poses, strength-based skills, and dynamic aerial sequences high above the stage. In circus, people may:

- Climb into and around the hoop while suspended in the air.
- Hang from their hands, knees, feet, or other parts of the body.
- Create elegant shapes and balances inside, underneath, and on top of the apparatus.
- Spin through the air while transitioning between poses.
- Demonstrate strength, flexibility, and control through static holds and dynamic movements.
- Combine aerial technique with dance, storytelling, and artistic expression.



Aerial Acts

Rope

Aerial Rope, also known by its French name Corde Lisse, is an aerial circus discipline performed on a single vertical rope suspended from above. Artists climb, wrap, balance, and move through the air using strength, technique, and precision to create dynamic and expressive performances. In circus, people may:

- Climb high into the air using only the rope.
- Create striking poses while suspended at height.
- Hang upside down or balance in seemingly impossible positions.
- Wrap and unwrap the rope around their body to perform intricate sequences.
- Execute controlled drops that showcase both skill and courage.
- Combine powerful athletic movements with fluid, dance-like transitions.



Aerial Acts

Straps

An aerial discipline performed using two narrow straps suspended from above. Artists use the straps to lift, support, and suspend their body while performing powerful strength-based movements high in the air. In circus, people may:

- Climb and suspend themselves using only their arms and upper body strength.
- Hold demanding strength positions while hanging in the air.
- Spin and rotate around the straps with speed and control.
- Perform dynamic swings, lifts, and drops.
- Transition seamlessly between powerful poses and fluid movements.
- Demonstrate extraordinary endurance, coordination, and body control.



Aerial Acts

Swinging Trapeze

An aerial discipline performed on a trapeze. The artist builds momentum by swinging backwards and forwards, using strength, timing, and technique to perform dynamic movements high above the stage. A safety belt is often used, allowing performers to attempt complex skills while working with a lunger, who controls the safety lines from the ground. In circus, people may:

- Build height and momentum through a series of swings.
- Hang by their hands, knees, ankles, or heels.
- Perform balances and dynamic tricks while the trapeze is in motion.
- Release and re-catch the bar during advanced sequences.
- Execute somersaults, turns, and other aerial skills while attached to safety lines.
- Work in partnership with a lunger, whose skill and timing support the performance.



Aerial Acts

Swinging Pole

An aerial discipline performed on a vertical pole suspended from above, allowing it to swing, arc, and move through space. Combining elements of Chinese pole and aerial arts, the discipline requires artists to climb, balance, spin, and execute acrobatic movements while the apparatus is in motion. In circus, people may:

- Climb and move dynamically around the pole.
- Hold balances and strength positions at height.
- Swing in large arcs through the air as the pole moves.
- Perform drops, slides, and controlled descents.
- Transition seamlessly between climbing, hanging, and acrobatic skills.
- Use momentum to create exciting aerial sequences and dramatic visual effects.



Circus Glossary

These are some additional terms you might come across at NICA.

Aerial Apparatus

Aerial Pole: A metal pole suspended from a rigging point, allowing spins, climbs, and tricks similar to pole dance but performed in the air.

Chinese Pole: A vertical pole (usually rubber-coated) on which performers climb, slide, and perform acrobatic holds, flips, and balances.

Cloud Swing: A long, soft rope or cable that forms a swinging arc.

Lyra (or Aerial Hoop, or A-Ring) :A circular steel apparatus suspended in the air, used for spinning, poses, and acrobatic movements above the ground.

Rope (or Corde Lisse): A smooth cotton rope suspended vertically, used for climbs, wraps, and dramatic aerial drops.

Silks (or Tissu): Two long fabric ribbons suspended from the ceiling that performers climb, wrap around their bodies, and use for drops, holds, and poses.

Straps: Two long, sturdy fabric or leather straps used for strength-based aerial acts involving spins, holds, and dynamic movements.

Trapeze A horizontal bar suspended by ropes; can be static, swinging, or flying. Used for solo or group aerial acrobatics.

Acrobatics & Balancing

Acrobalance: Partner or group acrobatics focusing on lifts, balances, and counterbalances, blending strength and trust.

Contortion: The art of extreme flexibility, often combining backbends, splits, and balance poses in performance.

Globe Balancing: An act where a performer balances and moves on top of a large sphere.

Handstand A balance skill performed upside-down on the hands; a foundation of acrobatics and strength acts.

Circus Glossary

These are some additional terms you might come across at NICA.

Rolla Bolla: An apparatus consisting of a board balanced on a rolling cylinder. Performers stand, jump, or stack multiple boards.

Tight Wire (or Tightrope): A wire or rope stretched tightly between two points; performers balance, walk, or perform tricks on it.

Juggling & Object Manipulation

Antipodist: A foot juggler!

Devil Sticks: (or Flower Sticks) A juggling prop set consisting of one main stick (the “baton”) and two hand sticks used to flip, spin, and toss the baton in the air.

Diablo: (or Diabolo) A double-coned prop spun and tossed on a string between two sticks

Hula Hoop: A circular hoop spun around the body or manipulated for performances.

Juggling (or Manipulation) The art of skillfully throwing, catching, and balancing objects (balls, clubs, rings, hats, etc.).

Spinning Plates Lightweight plates spun on the end of a stick, often balanced, exchanged, or juggled in performance.

Circus Vehicles & Wheels

German Wheel: Two large parallel rings connected by crossbars; the performer stands inside and rolls, spins, and balances.

Group Bike: A bicycle designed for multiple performers to ride and perform tricks with.

Roue Cyr (or Cyr Wheel): A large metal ring in which a performer spins and rolls across the floor, performing acrobatic manoeuvres.

Unicycle: A one-wheeled cycle ridden by balancing on the seat and pedaling.

Circus Glossary

These are some additional terms you might come across at NICA.

Rigging, Safety & Equipment

Lunge Rope Also known as a lunge line or safety rope, a long rope attached to a performer's harness or belt and held by someone to prevent a fall by acting as a counterweight.

Mag (or Magnesium Chalk Dust) A substance used to prevent slipping. Usually dusted on the hands, it helps increase grip.

Rigging A system of ropes, pulleys, counterweights, and related devices within a theatre or circus training space that enables riggers to hoist components such as curtains, lights, scenery, and, in the case of circus, people.

Spotting Refers to the process where a coach or 'spotter' physically assists a circus artist to safely complete a skill.

Truss A type of structural framework, commonly made of aluminum or steel, used to support and distribute loads in circus performances.

Thank you from NICA



National
Institute of
Circus Arts



aspect
Autism Spectrum Australia

Thank you for taking the time to learn about NICA and our circus shows.

This document was made in partnership with
Aspect: Autism Spectrum Australia.

We love feedback and are eager to know what helped or how we can improve your circus journey.

I can fill out an [online form](#), contact NICA on 1300 006 422 or email info@nica.com.au.

All feedback is welcome.

